

## Sliding into Winning Compositions

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How would you like to put your photography to work in the language arts classroom and provide hours of stimulating activities to improve students' writing? This paper will present a five-step sequence in which you can learn to structure and use visual compositions to actively involve students in the composition process. Moreover, you will be stimulating and integrating the processing modes of both brain hemispheres while sparking discourse from poorly motivated or language-deficient students.

A visual composition can be composed from your own existing slide or photography collection or it can be photographed from life occurrences once you sense how a visual composition guides students' thoughts and writing. A visual composition is a sequence of pictures that tells a complete story or infers a unified theme. Any life experience can provide subject matter for a visual story. Each aspect of the story is captured in a separate photo while the overall effect of the sequence suggests a holistic meaning. Try shooting one tree or another inanimate object from the same location through the seasons of the year. This provides a series of pictures that suggests one unified meaning such as "A tree changes its appearance through the year." At least four supporting examples, one for each season of the year, could relate to that central meaning.

The idea in structuring a visual composition is not to photograph just the final act in the traditional triumphant pose such as when your son or daughter brought in their first fish. The trophy picture showing a beaming youth with the fish held high in one hand and the rod in the other could be shown last. The whole sequence of events leading up to that prize catch, the baiting of the hook, the cast line, the struggle, the landing, etc. should also be captured on film. Once the same series of slides is projected before your student audience, they will be captivated by the step-by-step organization of your picture story.

Slides are not the only way of presenting visual stories. They can also be constructed from filmstrip or picture book sources. Magazines, brochures, newspaper advertisements, cartoons and comic strips, provide excellent visual sources of structure photo stories. Publications such as *Life* or *National Geographic* are best to investigate since they provide a series of pictures relating to one theme.

However, the use of slide sequences has the advantage of reaching class-size groups capitalizing on the movie-type format. Moreover, slides are easy to use in the classroom, are compact when stored, and can be rearranged to tell different types of stories. Most schools have slide projectors as part of standard equipment. Photographs or negatives that are in non-slide form can be converted to slides. Check on the procedure (and cost) at your local photography shop, or check with your High School Audio-Visual or Communications Department. They may be able to provide the service of slide conversion and mounting.

One last suggestion is to review your present slide collection. You may be able to put together several complete or partial photo stories.

Label your storage containers and form a mental image of each slide. Haber's research indicates that memory for pictures may be limitless (1970). His subjects could recall with about 90% accuracy over two thousand slides viewed over several days. As you compose new visual stories, you may be able to plug in a picture or two from your storage collection, or you may be able to photograph the one or two pictures needed to complete a partial story.

Teachers using visual compositions to elicit written compositions will engage students in the processes of viewing, composing, writing, editing, and polishing. Furthermore, once the written composition has been returned after review and evaluation, reading activities can profitably follow. Students could be directed to read selections that are organized in much the same way as the visual composition sequence they had just modeled in writing. Students may be better able to visualize the structural patterns of a similarly constructed paragraph since they had composed the same organizational type.

These are the five steps to follow in promoting written fluency through visual composition techniques.

#### **Step #1 - Structuring the Slide Sequence.**

The teacher needs to become aware of an intended outcome in public writing. Rather than assign a topic or a list of topic themes from which to choose, your procedure will be to elicit a composition from the slide presentation. Besides stimulating verbal expression from picture cues, you want to help students organize their thoughts and provide smooth transition from idea to idea. Therefore, you must become skillful in selecting the right slides to tell your particular visual story. Oftentimes, I'll photograph a whole roll of 36 slide exposures on one topic and select 8 or 10 that have just the visual cues to suggest the story I want. Remember, that each individual slide can generate "a thousand words." Your objective is to unify a series of individual shots into a meaningful whole. Even though some individual pictures might be good, they might be irrelevant to the central idea you wish to convey and may need to be eliminated from the sequence. Try and think how the student might write if he/she were to generate at least one sentence from each slide in the entire sequence.

The four traditional categories of discourse - narration, description, exposition, and argumentation - can provide the organizational framework for your composing work with the visual sequences. The different modes provide stylistic features that help students unify and organize their writing as well. Teachers can turn to many excellent sources to investigate more fully the thought processes involved in composing and reading in different modes of discourse (Baer and Haug 1970; Moffett, 1973; Schwartzmann and Kowalski, 1969).

I've generally found, however, that the following seven visual arrangements suit my expertise with the camera:

1. Showing events in a sequence or steps in a process,
2. Arranging a descriptive scene to show how people, places or things are positioned within the scene,
3. Comparing and contrasting features within the environment,

4. Enumerating items that belong to the same group or class,
5. Focusing on one central idea or theme and developing the theme with enough picture cues,
6. Focusing on characters involved in an argument, controversy, or on one person persuading another to act a certain way,
7. Combining features of the above to achieve a more detailed visual story with several organizational options.

The visual composition, once projected, unravels threads of meaning step-by-step before students' eyes. Each member of your captivated audience brings his/her language to the visual message. The actual text, the written message, will be supplied by your student writers. Generally, they model their compositions as the visuals were ordered. Debes (1978) had pointed out that a sequence of pictures previously viewed will affect the perception of a sequence of words.

Often, students will reveal in their papers that a flaw exists in a visual composition arrangement. A visual story may have gaps or inconsistencies that you weren't aware of when you composed the visual sequence. That doesn't mean that the visual story goes into eternal slide storage. Possibly the addition (or removal) of a few more pictures may produce the desired effect. For example, I wanted to compose a narrative sequence which I intended to be written in first person. The topic was a plane flight from an airport in southern Europe to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City. I asked students to take pens in hand and board the plane as they saw the approach of the loading ramp. Then they witnessed the taxiing, the takeoff, and the banking toward the coastline. The tip of the right wing remained in each ensuing slide shot to provide a consistent point of view for the trip over Europe. Then the ending rapidly came. Daylight faded as the tip of Long Island came into view. The plane landed in darkness with rows of street lights greeting the descending plane. After showing this sequence to a high school remedial reading group and reviewing their papers, I realized that this sequence lacked a middle element. Why hadn't I photographed some shots of the ocean, clouds, or the horizon from the plane's altitude to give a sense of distance and time! I waited for my next plane trip, took the necessary pictures, and plugged them into my previous incomplete visual composition. The next set of papers reflected a more complete sense of narrative organization with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

#### **Step #2 - Forming the Dominant Impression:**

##### **First Showing of Slide Sequence**

The dominant impression is more than the main idea of the visual composition. It implies affect and establishing a point-of-view towards the theme as well. Since photography can visually flavor and capture the mood of a theme, many students are affected on a sensual, feeling level. They respond to how they feel about a particular theme or arrangement and express this in their topic sentence. Baden (1975) maintained that before meaningful writing can occur, the feelings of the writer should be stimulated in that she/he is willing to make an emotional, sensuous commitment to the mode of expression whether it be expository,

narrative, argumentative, descriptive, or lyric. Others, however, will react on a more literal level and express the main idea in a matter-of-fact fashion.

The dominant impression sentence can be formulated after a fairly rapid projection of the visual sequence. Each slide should be projected just enough so that the sequence is somewhat continuous in movement. After this viewing of the whole, each student should be asked to write at the top of a blank piece of paper or a prepared work-sheet his/her own dominant impression sentence.

It is also wise for the teacher to use an economy of language while presenting the visual selection. The teacher may over-influence the way the visual story will be processed and the way the resultant composition will be written with too much description of the content. Unlike the film, in which narration is supplied with the visualized scenes, the use of slide sequences asks students to use their own language and reaction to ideas suggested in the visual arrangement. Since each student differs in internalized facility with language and in attitudes towards certain visual themes, the level of visual and written involvement can vary with different visual selections. The range could run from a literal translation of what was viewed to a creative work sparked by an inferred meaning from the visual theme.

Prompt with enough questions so that each student can form a topic sentence which will become the key to the organizational structure of the written composition. This dominant impression sentence, on whatever level it is expressed, becomes the unifying element regarding the theme's development.

### **Step #3 - Jotting Down:**

#### **Second Showing of Slide Sequence**

Now the visual sequence can be shown again at a more leisurely pace. With some lighting available, each slide should be projected long enough so that students can jot down fragments or complete sentences relating to their expressed theme. Sometimes, however, a student will formulate one sentence based on a number of ideas suggested in several slides. Usually, several minutes will be required for the writing prompted by each slide.

Each succeeding sentence should tie in with the unifying element adopted in the dominant impression sentence. For instance, after viewing a cake baking sequence, Gloria literally writes, "The three girls baked a cake for the class party," while Sarah sitting alongside, writes on a more interpretive and creative level, "Baking a cake can be a messy but tasty business." Having internalized meaning at different levels, each girl must select visual cues during the second viewing that relate to their own unifying impression. In a sense, "context clues" are abstracted from each visual frame that relate to the central idea.

During this phase, I'll often distribute lists of transition words and phrases to help students achieve linkage and coherence for a particular organizational style. These words are often described as function words, i.e., subordinate and coordinate conjunctions, prepositions, degree words, etc., which allow sentence structures to work while linking the meaning-

bearing content words with one another. Content will be suggested through picture cues while the organizational arrangements of the visual sequence may suggest the appropriate connectors. Appropriate word lists and the relationships they suggest may be found in a good English composition and grammar series (Warriner, Mersand, Townsend, and Griffith, 1969).

Particularly, transitional words that support or alter the direction of thought or words that help describe spatial relationships are quite important for students to use and comprehend. For example, when a narrative or some thematic sequences are shown, students may find it helpful to refer to those transitional words which carry the direction of thought forward. Each step in the sequential action is shown so that the writer would be led into this type of organization. The student would then be cued to use connectors such as, "next . . . , after that . . . , then . . . , finally," etc., lending smooth transition amongst ideas.

To elicit a descriptive-type composition, a scene could be photographed where objects and/or people are located in visual proximity to each other, such as a group of people feeding wild birds in a park. In this way a spatial organization would be implied and the relating of this spatial relationship will help organize the student's writing. The student would be promoted to use transition words and phrases such as, "by the . . . , behind the . . . , across from the . . . , to the right of . . . ," etc. Words that change the direction of thought such as "but . . . , still . . . , however . . . , yet," etc. could assist students in relating to visual stories which compare or contrast features or to those suggesting a theme of argumentation or persuasion.

One additional visual technique to use in the early stages of writing visually prompted themes is to prepare a worksheet leaving room for the dominant impression sentence on top with a series of lined rectangular boxes, approximately one inch by five inches, ruled down the remainder of the page. Chain links can then be drawn between the rectangular boxes linking each one. Sentences derived from visual cues would be written within the boxes, while transition words or phrases would be written within the chain links. This activity helps students isolate the exact relationships that connector words express.

#### **Step #4 - Polishing and Editing:**

When students have completed the joint viewing and writing activity, they need additional classroom time to reorganize and polish the first draft. They will still be able to visualize individual frames and the holistic meaning of the visual experience and this will help them to focus on specific sentences and ideas that need reworking. Forming mental imagery has been shown to strengthen memory (Paivio 1971; Bower, 1972) and sentence comprehension for poor readers lacking organizational strategies (Levin, 1973). Suiter and Potter (1978) found that learning disabled children recalled significantly more visual material when pictures were presented in an organized way and suggested that their verbal recall could be facilitated by organizing visual materials. Furthermore, the ability to think in visual images is apparently associated with the processing

mode of the brain's right hemisphere and may be the recall strategy of right hemisphere dominants (Coleman & Zenhausern, 1979).

In the reworking of words and sentence structures, students translate visual impressions into the most appropriate language choices. Before turning in the final paper, students should be urged to proofread, checking both for clarity of expression and correct English usage. Mechanical difficulties regarding spelling, punctuation, and grammatical agreement will appear in these papers as they would in any composition assignment. However, students may find it less difficult to correct word and sentence errors with a clear visual referent in mind. A good practice is to collect the initial writing effort of the jotting-down phase with the finished product. In this way, both the composing process and the writing capability of each student can be reviewed.

#### **Step #5 - Teaching Strategies:**

Now the teacher interacts with the class group to expand language growth and development. A major effort may be directed to an analysis of the style of writing that students followed and whether this style was exemplified and aided by the visual composition.

The teacher's greatest advantage at this point is that a common communicative base is shared by the class group. The visual experience remains in the "mind's eye." After returning the papers to the students, the teacher will have to decide how much teaching time should be spent for that particular visual-writing experience. Options and strategies are numerous. An additional period may be devoted to an explication of the style of writing and how students captured it in their writing, or if enthusiasm runs high, the teacher may find it beneficial to devote more time to further student rewritings.

Some suggestions of combined visual-writing strategies designed to facilitate composing, writing, and reading processes are:

1. Reshow the entire visual sequence after papers are returned, commenting on the organization implied by the visual arrangement. Specific cues that related to a particular type of organization can be pointed out as an individual slide remains in focus. The teacher may enrich vocabulary development at this point by using words that best describe a scene or action.
2. Read aloud specific papers that captured the style of writing intended by the arrangement of the visual compositions. Understanding organization and structure will assist students in later writing attempts.
3. Have students read their paragraphs aloud or have a student composition projected on the overhead. This is a highly important strategy in promoting facility with written language. Students shift roles as transmitters and receivers of language as they present their paragraphs to the class group. Since the experience is common to all, one student will be better able to visualize how another expressed the same scene, action, or theme. Papers that expressed a literal version of the theme could be contrasted with those that were more interpretive or creative. Students will enjoy sharing their written expression and listening to other students express the theme in a different way.

4. Have specific sentences read aloud from other papers that captured a poignant meaning or mood from a particular slide shot. A combination of such creative sentences could form a separate "ideal" paragraph for that sequence.

5. Point out the concreteness or vividness of word choice to describe a particular scene or event.

6. Develop the use of figurative language to describe or portray a certain meaning. If individual students used the simile or metaphor on their own while trying to express their feeling towards a certain visual theme, the teacher may wish to develop follow-up lessons to help students describe other scenes with the use of figurative language.

7. Work on transitional devices and words that fit the relationship of a visual arrangement by concentrating on the transition between two shots.

8. Work on syntax and sentence construction itself by illustrating how students could combine ideas from several shots to form one sentence. Serial arrangement and compound/complex sentence structure combined with the use of transitional words would encourage students in divergent sentence production.

9. Read paragraphs selected from other sources that further illustrate the style of writing students just completed in a visual-writing exercise. Since each student has been involved in the process of organization of discourse, he/she may be able to perceive this self-same structure more readily in reading experiences. This awareness will strengthen overall facility with written discourse and the student's ability to relate central ideas to supportive ones in writers' organizational structure. This would be an important strategy in helping students see the close relationship between reading and writing.

In conclusion, the use of visual compositions has meshed the structure of the subject with the structure of the student (Moffett, 1968). The five-step plan provides a method of tying language and written organization to concrete visual experiences regardless of each student's facility with the surface structure of language. Pictures or slide sequences can assist students of all language capability levels to slide into winning compositions.

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